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## The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict

### Summary

- The Syrian conflict's internal dynamics have reshuffled regional alignments alongside unprecedentedly clear-cut sectarian dividing lines; this has often occurred against the preferences of regional state actors – including Saudi Arabia and Iran.
- Foreign states have generally adopted expedient policies that followed sectarian patterns for lack of alternatives.
- Iran bears significant responsibility for exacerbating the conflict's sectarian character at the regional level.
- There is no such “diplomatic shortcut” to regional appeasement; it is the domestic Syrian deadlock that must be broken in order to alleviate sectarian tensions across the Middle East, not the opposite.

### Background

The sectarian character of the Syrian conflict is often mischaracterized as having been fueled by regional state actors exploiting sectarianism to advance regional agendas. A more accurate characterization is that the Syrian conflict's internal dynamics have reshuffled regional alignments alongside unprecedentedly clear-cut sectarian dividing lines and that this has often occurred *against* the preferences of regional state actors – including Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is not to deny that regional actors sometimes contributed to deepening the sectarian character of the Syrian conflict. When they did so, however, it was generally as a by-product of expedient policies that followed sectarian patterns for lack of alternatives, but were not part of a deliberately sectarian agenda. In fact, outside of Syria, wholehearted exploitation of sectarian sentiments in relation to the conflict has often been the preserve of private actors that are not constrained by *raison d'état*, in particular transnational Sunni (Salafi) and Shia networks.

The extreme level of sectarian polarization that has been observed in Syria from early 2012 on was largely the making of Syrians themselves, and was the product, in particular, of a regime whose policies have been characterized by decades of pro-Alawite favoritism in the army and security forces, manipulation of the minorities' existential fear with regard to the Sunni majority, and deliberate radicalization of Sunnis through massive and indiscriminate violence. Thus, it is illusory to seek the causes of (and possible solutions to) sectarian radicalization in Syria in the strategies of external actors.

Two distinct sectarian coalitions are currently opposing each other in the regional crisis that centers around Syria: on the one hand, a pro-Assad Shia axis, i.e. Iran, Maliki's Iraq, Lebanon's Shia parties and Shia foreign fighters; on the other hand, an anti-Assad Sunni axis, i.e. Saudi Arabia, Qatar,

“The responsibility of regional state actors in the sectarianization of the Syrian crisis should not be overstated. Rather, it is the deeply sectarian character of the conflict that has imposed itself upon regional alignments and behaviors.”

Turkey, Jordan, the Lebanese and Iraqi Sunni oppositions, and non-state Sunni religious and militant transnational networks. The homogeneous nature of these alignments is not a cause, but rather a consequence of the Syrian crisis. Indeed, of the three most important state supporters of the Syrian opposition in the region, that is, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, only the first one was pursuing a distinctly “Sunni” foreign policy before 2011, as both Qatar and Turkey used to have excellent relations with Syria and Iran at that time. The same could be said for the Palestinian Hamas, which has gradually distanced itself from Damascus and Tehran over the last two years. Of course, the pre-2011 anti-Iranian axis (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan) was homogeneously Sunni, but none of its components behaved according to a clear sectarian pattern when the crisis erupted in Syria, because sectarian logics were often superseded by alternative calculations.

Because of its unrelenting efforts to preserve Alawite rule in Syria, and because of its mobilization of Shia militias across the region in support of the Assad regime, Iran bears a significant responsibility for exacerbating the conflict’s sectarian character – not so much inside Syria, where sectarianism is deeply ingrained anyway, but rather at the regional level. To a certain extent, however, this ran counter to the intentions (and interests) of Tehran, whose foreign policy has always been ambivalent in its relation to sectarianism. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic has constantly tried to portray itself as a non-sectarian actor in order to maximize its appeal among the region’s predominantly Sunni populations. On the other hand, Iran’s regional strategy has acquired a distinctly sectarian flavor because Shia networks have proved to be its most reliable vehicles of influence, most notably in Lebanon and Iraq, and because of Tehran’s partnership with Assad’s Alawite regime, initially a mere alliance *de revers* against Saddam’s Iraq. This ambivalence explains why although Iran is now helping Assad to fight a sectarian war against the Sunni insurgency, it has refrained from officially embracing a sectarian narrative of the conflict.

The Syrian civil war saw the Islamic Republic crossing a new threshold in its sectarian approach to regional politics, namely, the mobilization of foreign Shia fighters in order to support Assad’s troops. In particular, the Lebanese Hezbollah’s decisive contribution to the capture of al-Qusayr by the regime in June 2013 brought anti-Shia resentment across the Muslim world to unprecedented levels. However, Tehran’s decision to recruit sectarian militias was a last resort, long-resisted move that was not dictated by some inherent sectarian drive. Instead, it was aimed at addressing a problem stemming from the Syrian conflict’s sectarian nature, that is, the regime’s growing lack of manpower. The recruitment of foreign Shia fighters was only one aspect of a broader attempt at reinforcing loyalist forces through the establishment (often along sectarian patterns) of various domestic and foreign militias.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Syrian crisis, Saudi Arabia has followed an opposite course: starting from a more openly sectarian stance than that of Iran, Riyadh surprisingly emerged, until a very recent reorientation, as the chief supporter of the most secular segment of the opposition.

Over the past decades, Saudi Arabia has encouraged anti-Shia propaganda in the region on at least three occasions: in the 1980s, in order to curtail the appeal of the Iranian revolution; after 2003, in order to counter the rise of Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria;<sup>2</sup> after 2011, as a divide-and-rule strategy aimed at preventing the revolutionary wave from reaching Gulf societies.<sup>3</sup> However, the Saudi monarchy does not need to manipulate sectarian sentiments in order to convince its subjects of the merits of supporting the Syrian opposition, a stance that has elicited virtually no opposition among Saudi subjects. In fact, Riyadh perceives the exacerbation of sectarianism as a result of the brutalization of the Syrian conflict as a threat because it stimulates Islamic activism at the domestic level. This is something Saudi authorities do not want, as shown by their crackdown on the recruitment of volunteer fighters and on private fund-raising initiatives for the Syrian rebels.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this reluctance are many: the Saudi rulers want (but have failed) to prevent the emergence of a new generation of Saudi jihadi militants, they fear the possible spread of revolutionary ideas inside the country, and they have already been criticized for “not doing enough” to support the Syrians.

Concerns for domestic stability, and more particularly distrust of political Islamic movements (including politicized Salafis), also encouraged Saudi Arabia (as well as Jordan, after months of hesitation due to fear of Syrian retaliation and of political change in the region) to support the least Islamist, and generally least sectarian, segments of the opposition. Among the opposition abroad, Riyadh tried to counterbalance the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood by supporting a coalition of former Baathists (Riyad Hijab, Mustafa al-Asad), secular intellectuals (led by Christian opposition leader Michel Kilo), tribal chiefs (Ahmad al-Jarba), and secular-leaning representatives of the Free Syrian Army (Luay Miqdad).

On the ground, Saudi Arabia favored initiatives aimed at organizing the insurgency under the aegis of defector officers, among the least religious component of the rebel leadership. As recently as last August, Riyadh's allies in the opposition put forward a project to establish "Syrian National Army" explicitly aimed at countering the spread of "extremist ideas" among the military opposition to Assad.

<sup>5</sup> In the absence of meaningful Western intervention in the conflict, therefore, Saudi and Jordanian support for moderate rebel units remained the only obstacle to the rise of their more radical (and sectarian) counterparts. This situation only changed in the very last days of September 2013, when the Saudis backed the establishment of two new Salafi coalitions (the Army of Islam in Damascus and the Army of the Sunnis in Deir ez-Zor). That was, however, an expedient move driven by the need to set up a counterweight to radical jihadi groups like the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. The latter's influence had just dramatically increased at the expense of the Free Syrian Army, whose pro-Western stance lost much of its currency following the cancellation of announced U.S. airstrikes against the regime earlier that month.<sup>6</sup>

The involvement of other pro-opposition state actors in the conflict has at times followed a sectarian pattern, but it was never as part of an overall sectarian strategy. Qatar and Turkey initially did their best to save Assad from his own obstinacy by offering to broker a reasonable deal with the opposition. In its subsequent support for the latter, Doha has tried to maximize its influence by cultivating partners of various obediences, from moderate Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood to secular figures like Suhayr al-Atassi. At the military level, Qatar has shown much less reluctance to back Islamist brigades than Saudi Arabia, but not for ideological reasons. The Emirate rather adopted an opportunistic approach consisting in supporting groups that had already asserted their credibility on the ground, and, as importantly, were not under Saudi influence. Turkey has turned a blind eye on the activities of Jihadis on its border, but in the sole purpose of putting military pressure on the PKK. As for the recently overthrown Egyptian government of Mohammed Morsi, it purely and simply refrained from supporting the Syrian opposition as a result of its rapprochement with Iran. Only two weeks before its fall did Morsi change course in a desperate attempt at garnering domestic support.

## Conclusion

The responsibility of regional state actors in the "sectarianization" of the Syrian crisis should not be overstated. Rather, it is the deeply sectarian character of the conflict that has imposed itself upon regional alignments and behaviors. Even overtly sectarian moves, such as Iran's decision to send foreign Shia volunteers into Syria, were the product of a domestic Syrian situation that has left Tehran with little room for non-sectarian patterns of intervention. Moreover, on the other side of the conflict, Saudi Arabia long resisted the temptation to support the most blatantly sectarian elements of the opposition.

Exaggerating the responsibility of regional actors in the worsening of the conflict's sectarian character may be tempting for Western governments: first, because such a view obscures the role their own shortcomings have played in the deterioration of the situation in Syria; second, because it

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Thomas Pierret is a lecturer in Contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh. He has written on the issue of sectarianism and the role of Islamic forces in the Syrian revolution, and is the author of *Religion and State in Syria* and *The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). This Peace Brief is one in a five-part USIP series on sectarianism in the Middle East.

gives credibility to diplomatic (versus military) options by suggesting that pressuring regional state actors, and particularly Western allies is key to the attenuation of sectarian tensions in Syria and the region at large. There is no such “diplomatic shortcut” to regional appeasement; it is the domestic Syrian deadlock that must be broken in order to alleviate sectarian tensions across the Middle East, not the opposite.

## Notes

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